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Double-check

EPA to further test BASF's soil, groundwater

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WYANDOTTE — BASF Corp. may have to increase cleanup efforts at its North Works site if contaminants still are getting into the Detroit River.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recently called for further investigation of soil and ground-water conditions at the 230 acres of waterfront land.

For about seven years, BASF has been following a Michigan Department of Natural Resources order to treat ground water so contaminants won't flow underground to the river.

Fifteen wells were installed to prevent ground water from carrying chemicals such as propylene dichloride to the river, which feeds into the Great Lakes. Propylene dichloride is a moderately toxic liquid that can cause dermatitis and liver, kidney and heart damage.

The wells extract the ground water and pump it to a treatment system before sending it to the Wyandotte Wastewater Treatment Plant for discharge into the river.

NOW THE federal agency wants BASF to look into 13 other areas "not all of high concern," EPA technician Diane Sharrow said.

"The state order isn't as extensive as the EPA wants," Sharrow said. "We want a report of what's happened at the site and from that we may ask BASF to take other soil or ground-water samples. We're not sure all the ground-water is being kept out of the river. We're not suggesting anything; we just don't know right now."

The North Works is bounded roughly by the river, Perry Place, Biddle Avenue and Mulberry Street.

BASF will analyze more soil and ground-water samples and then may change its cleanup plans, General Manager Gary Durst said. The EPA says BASF must expand its cleanup effort if the investigation shows "additional dangerous contamination."

"THE EPA wants us to reassess the property," Durst said. "I'm sure it's because of our proximity to the river and concerns about water quality of the Great Lakes."

Sharrow added that all of southeastern Michigan is a concern to the EPA because of the Great Lakes.

"We're looking at a lot of sites because we want to know what's going into the lakes," she said. "(Elf) Atochem (North America Inc. in Riverview) is another site we're interested in."

Cleanup efforts at the North Works are complicated because the site is a former wetlands area filled and used since the 1800s for manufacturing, research and pilot projects for industrial organic chemicals, plastics and vitamins.

"THERE'S A laundry list of chemicals there," Sharrow said. "Many are chlorinated solvents. BASF has undertaken a voluntary program to figure out where toluene is coming from."

Toluene is a chemical that comes in several forms that are confirmed and suspected carcinogens.

BASF is supposed to extract and treat ground water at the North Works for at least 15 years. Durst said the latest EPA requirements could turn into a project that would take years to complete.

"There's an elaborate procedure just to take a soil sample," Durst said. "The first phase will take months. In the end we may have to take more actions over and above what we're doing now."